

Tragic bits and pieces

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The study of tragic fragments - now facilitated by handy translations - can greatly enhance our understanding of surviving tragedies; consider the light thrown by the scanty remnants of Aeschylus' *Glaucus of Potniae* on the production of which it formed part - which included *The Persians* - and on the false messenger-speech in Sophocles' *Electra*.

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides wrote nearly 300 plays between them, over a period of more than ninety years. Of these, just over thirty survive complete or nearly complete: these are the plays that were known in the Byzantine Empire in the late Middle Ages, the plays of which manuscript copies were brought to Western Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and soon afterwards formed the basis of printed editions, the plays which can now be read in countless translations into scores of modern languages. But a great deal is known nevertheless about the other 90% or so of these dramatists' output. By the time this article appears it will be possible, for the first time ever, to access in English essential information about all these hundreds of dramas, together with most of what we possess of their texts, as the Loeb Library publishes up-to-date editions of the fragments of Euripides (by Christopher Collard and Martin Cropp) and of Aeschylus (by the present author) to join the edition of Sophocles' fragments (by Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones), which appeared in 1996.

New light on ancient drama

The study of fragments, involving the assessment and combination of many bits of evidence of different kinds, most of them usually slight and ambiguous, is not easy, to say the least. But it is immensely rewarding in many different ways, and especially in enriching our understanding of tragic drama itself, of its great composers and their technique and thought, and of the Athenian culture in which they worked. For example, the seven surviving tragedies (out of a total of 123) are regularly built around a single central figure - the 'Sophoclean hero(ine)' - magnificent in his or her rock-solid intransigence. The same poet's fragmentary plays, however, show that our seven are a highly skewed sample, and perhaps

selected for survival in part precisely because of this feature.

Tragic treatments of a myth may throw light on other treatments of the same myth, in tragedy and elsewhere: we will understand Euripides' surviving *Hippolytus* (*Hippolytus 'wearing a garland'*) far better if we see it, as far as we are able, against the background of two recent presentations of the same story, Euripides' own *Hippolytus Veiled* and Sophocles' *Phaedra*, which most members of the original audience will have seen. In many fragmentary plays we find features of tragic technique or plot-structure which are hardly to be found in our thirty-odd complete plays, such as the frequent motif of the reunion of a suffering mother with her long-lost children (as in Sophocles' *Tyro B* and Euripides' *Melanippe the Captive*, *Antiope*, and *Hypsipyle*) - which may make us look with new eyes at the very different mother-son reunions found in Euripides' *Ion* (and his fragmentary *Cresphontes*) or even in *Oedipus the King* or in the plays about Orestes' revenge. But for many, the satisfaction of acquiring knowledge may be its own best reward.

Gory details

I want to look briefly at what we can learn from just one fragmentary play, and certainly not one of the better preserved ones. This is Aeschylus' play *Glaucus of Potniae*, which was produced together with *The Persians* in 472 B.C. From this play we have bits of one papyrus copy, containing bigger or smaller parts of about 95 lines, not one of which is complete. We also have about ten ancient and medieval quotations, amounting altogether to 53 words at the very most.

Glaucus of Potniae was chiefly notable for having experienced the most gruesome racing accident of all time at the funeral games of Pelias at Iolcus: he was not only thrown from his chariot but also eaten by his own horses. He had, it is generally

agreed, been asking for trouble, either by feeding his mares on human flesh (other people's) or by putting them on a no-sex regime, but we don't know which of these versions Aeschylus adopted (or maybe invented). The interest of the fragments lies elsewhere.

In one part of the papyrus, Glaucus seems to be about to leave home on his way for the games; in a quotation, probably from the same scene, he says that 'contests don't wait for men who arrive late'. Most of what else can be read on the papyrus apparently comes from a speech in which news of the disaster is brought to Glaucus' wife. Passages from both these scenes were quoted or parodied at crucial moments of Aristophanes' *Frogs* (one of them at the very end of the play), so evidently *Glaucus of Potniae* was still a fairly well-known drama 67 years after its first performance.

That is almost (not quite) all we know of the play. But two features of it throw new light on other, much more familiar texts. The messenger-speech about the fatal race was evidently a long and vivid one; probably it was the high point of the play. It has often been compared with Homer's account of the chariot-race at the funeral games of Patroclus (*Iliad* 23.262-652); but that involved no fatalities, and there is another narrative that may be closer kin. Two features of the race that we can identify are, firstly, that at some point there was a multiple pile-up (not necessarily involving Glaucus) in which several drivers were killed, and secondly that Glaucus' crash and death occurred on the last lap. Both these features are also found in the brilliant lying tale of Orestes' fatal chariot-race at the Pythian Games, told by his slave to Clytemnestra in Sophocles' *Electra*; it seems very likely that Sophocles had the Aeschylean speech in mind, and many of his audience will have done as well - but what a difference it will make that this time the story being told is one that never happened!

The Italian job

There is a puzzle about this play. A two-word fragment quoted (and probably garbled) in a lexicon written at the time of the Roman Empire refers to a harbour at

or near Rhegium, on the toe of Italy. What on earth could this have to do with a play whose onstage setting is presumably Potniae, near Thebes, and whose main offstage location is Iolcus in Thessaly? What is more, an ancient commentator on Pindar quotes from Aeschylus' *Glaucus* a couplet in which someone says that he or she bathed in 'fair waters' and then came to 'Himera on its high cliffs'. Himera was in northern Sicily. How can this Italian material be explained?

You'll have noticed that the couplet is cited simply from *Glaucus*, so it can be – and has been – suggested that it is really from Aeschylus' other play of the same name, *Glaucus the Sea-god*. But that is not very plausible: Glaucus the Sea-god was originally a fisherman of Anthedon in Boeotia (in Greece), who jumped into the sea after eating a herb that made him immortal; and since, according to Plato, he was covered with stones, seaweed, and shellfish, he can hardly have reported taking time off to have a good freshwater bath in Sicily. Nevertheless, the speaker is indeed likely to have been a god (who else could travel so easily between Greece and Sicily/Italy?), and if the play is *Glaucus of Potniae*, the obvious god is Poseidon, the god both of horses and of water (fresh as well as salt).

But why Himera? In a play produced together with *The Persians*, there can only be one answer. Himera was the scene of a victory by Gelon of Syracuse over the Carthaginians, believed to have been gained on the same day as the victory over the Persians at Salamis. Poseidon is likely, then, to have appeared in *Glaucus of Potniae*, probably towards the end, and made a prophecy of Greek victory over the western barbarians there to balance the Greek victories over the eastern barbarians that are narrated or predicted in *The Persians*. Two or three other little pieces of evidence point the same way. Potniae, where the action of the play is set, is on the road from Plataea to Thebes, and Athenian troops will have marched through it on their way to besiege Thebes after the battle of Plataea in 479. At the battle of Himera, too, the enemy commander, Hamilcar, had been killed by Syracusan *cavalry* while engaged in a *sacrifice* to Poseidon. And according to the geographer Strabo, Aeschylus said somewhere that Rhegium (which, if it were a Greek word, would mean 'Breakage') was so named because this was where Sicily had been broken off from Italy by an *earthquake* – in other words, by the action of Poseidon; and we already know that the Rhegium area was mentioned in *Glaucus of Potniae*. All in all, it is extremely likely that the play which followed *The Persians* in Aeschylus' production of 472, and which seems so remote from it in subject, actually continued its topical theme. It may even be the case (as I believe) that all four

Aeschylean plays were associated with the Persian Wars. At any rate, there is certainly quite a bit to be got out of the few remaining scraps of this drama about a team of man-eating mares.

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